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This paper examines the flawed foundation of the Clinton Administration's national security strategy (NSS) which lacks clear, coherent priorities An essential starting point in developing a NSS is to determine the ends to be achieved by differentiating between specific national interests based upon threats to those interests Determining the degree of national interests within the global landscape allows the ends to be prioritized, helps determine the costs and risks of achieving or enhancing those interests, and allows decision makers a focus for making choices among short-term and long-term policies The current NSS, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, fails to differentiate between our specific national interests and concomitant threats because it hinges on a foundation of five key, but questionable, assumptions This paper explores potential liabilities inherent in those assumptions and proposes that the United States (U S) must undertake a critical analysis of its national interests and threats to serve as the bedrock for development of a future NSS

Two guiding assumptions in the foundation of the current NSS are that the lines between domestic and foreign policy are increasingly blurred and that we are a nation with global security, economic, and democratic interests Two distinct liabilities evolve from these collective attitudes First, while many would not contend that our national interests extend globally, the challenge is to discriminate among those interests as a guide to determine the necessary means and resources available to defend or enhance those interests The current NSS does not provide this element of the foundation In the context of global national interests, the NSS focuses our strategic approach on shaping the international environment, responding to crises, and preparing for an uncertain future The strategy attempts to tier our national interests into vital, important and humanitarian concerns but only in the context of responding to crises However, this stratification of interests must be overlaid on all elements of our strategic

approach, not just in responding to crises Without this distinction, there exists a danger of subordinating our vital interests to lesser, peripheral interests By assuming global interests, we also risk subordinating U S. interests to other nations' national interests by integrating their domestic and political agendas into our strategy Due to limited resources, our NSS can't afford to be a union of international interests Policies and priorities of the NSS must be rooted in U S vital interests projected onto the international landscape and not a reflection of the peripheral concerns of other nations projected onto the U.S

A second liability that emerges from these attitudes is an intellectual lethargy and paralysis Too much emphasis on the blurring of domestic and foreign policy provides the administration a convenient excuse that absolves them from making hard choices in setting priorities Assuming a global, indiscriminate approach to interests also allows the NSS to acquiesce to all domestic groups with entrenched interests no matter how vital or peripheral the interest This assumption increases the cost to our nation of defending all interests as equally important and diverting attention and energy from key issues Closely related to the identification of our national interests is the identification of threats that relate to those interests

Another key assumption in the current NSS is that a diverse range of global threats challenges our interests It states that these dangers are unprecedented, and if the U S doesn't tackle them, threats will multiply and force us to contend with the consequences of neglect Therefore, our leadership and engagement is vital for security The NSS defines three intertwined threats regional, transnational, and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) Regional threats endanger our vital interests, transnational threats are center stage and combating them is vital to our security, and WMD pose the greatest threat to global security As defined in the NSS, the union of assumptions regarding global interests and threats suggests that all global

challenges are directly linked to vital aspects of our national interests Absent a discrimination of interests, based on the intensity of the threats, the NSS elicits several troubling dilemmas

One dilemma involves the perspective of choice Although global challenges are real, and some do require U S attention, the existence of diverse threats must be kept in proper perspective Not every global problem is a threat to U S national interests nor requires us to expend our resources Plus, the NSS doesn't clearly articulate how these diverse threats impede our ability to achieve national interests It doesn't illustrate how the intensity of transnational problems such as international crime or environmental damage affects vital U S interests No matter how reprehensible certain regional atrocities or humanitarian troubles might be, we must recognize that there are limits to what the U S can reasonably achieve U S power and resources extend only so far, and without a clear focus on our vital interests, it becomes difficult to make choices and allocate resources among the various international plights, especially within short and long-term perspectives Finally, a lack of priorities among our interests invites a reactionary posture, allowing international events to dictate our NSS agenda and unnecessarily consume resources on an ad hoc basis no matter how peripheral the threat This can encumber the U S with a broad investment portfolio of commitments, drive a risk maximizing and cost maximizing strategy, and ultimately diminish our power

The remaining key NSS assumptions regard the assessment of power in the international environment These perceptions contend that the international community is reluctant to act without U S leadership, and the U S is the only nation capable of providing this leadership These assumptions translate into an imperative that our leadership is vital and that we must remain the preferred security partner However, these attitudes expose the NSS to several potential dangers

One potential problem is that other nations may be content to allow the U.S to continually take the lead If we continue to respond to global concerns with an attitude that other nations exhibit reticent leadership, these nations may be satisfied to be free riders and remain in the U S shadow [1] It is easier for other nations to take advantage of the U S propensity to expend its resources in international commitments This allows the other nations to preserve their assets for their own interests Additionally, projecting attitudes that we are the preferred security partner and that only we can lead may, paradoxically, diminish our leverage Instead of allowing us to choose the instruments of policy, other nations may subtly influence our choice of tools These attitudes may force us to engage additional instruments and expend additional resources to encourage other nations to participate in these international endeavors Bosnia could be viewed as an example where other nations were reluctant to engage until we employed our military We moved increasingly from reliance on our diplomatic and economic tools, to an extension of our military instrument in an effort to influence the participation of other nations

One remaining problem with the U S attitude of preferred, superior leadership regards the delicate balance of our prestige and credibility Again, without a clear distinction between vital and peripheral interests, we risk spreading ourselves too thin, over extending our resources, and exhibiting reactive diplomacy These actions may damage our prestige if other nations perceive our inability to favorably influence outcomes Our intervention in Somalia could be conceived as an instance where U S prestige was damaged as we allowed a peripheral interest in a humanitarian mission to escalate in importance as we elevated the mission to one of nation-building Yet, far from providing the superior leadership to this international challenge, we withdrew after U S servicemen were killed but before we had completed our efforts at nation-building [2] Equally damaging is the emphasis this attitude of superior leadership places on the

issue of credibility, both domestically and internationally If a superior leadership attitude encumbers the U S with commitments disproportionate to our national interests and resources, public and congressional debates may add to the international pressure in the calculus of our decisions Unable to explain the distinction between challenges that threaten our vital versus peripheral interests, we may refrain from engaging certain international problems It will be difficult to please all interest groups and, ultimately, difficult to preserve our credibility as we try to explain our response to some international problems, but not others.

The combination of assumptions that serve as the foundation for the current NSS do not provide a clear sense of priorities among our national interests This failure evokes a strategy of engagement based upon a vague and broad list of strategic priorities designed to address all-encompassing global interests and threats The strategy subsequently risks diluting our resources and available power to achieve these priorities To alleviate this deficiency, the U S must focus on the national interest as a vital element of the NSS and conduct a rigorous analysis of the domestic and international environment using a methodology and criteria similar to Donald Neuchterlein's national interest construct. Priority should be given to conducting a long-term trends analysis and environmental assessment juxtaposed with cost/risk and value criteria to define our vital national interests These criteria would include such factors as nature and proximity of the threat, economic and prestige elements at stake, risk of conflicts and domestic and allied opposition to actions [3] This process would provide the concrete infrastructure necessary for the prioritization of vital national interests and help determine a coherent strategic approach to diverse global threats Such a hierarchy would eliminate the appearance of ad hoc strategy and provide greater flexibility in deciphering between short and long-term policy decisions, yet still retain the overall vision and direction provided by the vital national interests

NOTES

1 Zalmay Khalilzad, "Losing the Moment? The United States and the World After the Cold War," *The Washington Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1995) 105

2 Charles William Maynes, "Bottom-Up Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy* 104 (Fall 1996). 36.

3. Donald E Neuchterlain, "National Interest as a Basis for Foreign Policy Formulation," in *America Overcommitted United States National Interests in the 1980s* (Lexington, KY University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 18-28